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Military moms lobby airlines for lower fares

By John Simerman
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In late April, Army Ranger Kris Conklin got word that he could fly home to San Ramon on a short convalescent leave, courtesy of the shrapnel wound in his leg from a rocket-propelled grenade, suffered during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

With five days notice, his mother, Peggy Conklin, scrambled to book her son's plane ticket. The usual sticker shock awaited. One airline quoted her \$1,950 for the ride from Washington, where he was attending the funeral of a fallen comrade, to San Francisco and back to his base in Georgia.

Miffed, the soldier's mother explained the situation. A ticket agent told her the airline could offer a special military fare: \$1,920. A \$30 discount.

"I was crying. I was so frustrated. I tried to explain: He's just gotten back from war. He's wounded. His friends have been killed. Can't you give him some kind of break?" Peggy Conklin said.

Ultimately, a local Vietnam veteran donated his frequent flier miles so her son could fly home free. But her tale is among many that have driven a local military mothers' group to political action.

Blue Star Moms, a Contra Costa group formed shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, is urging the major airlines to offer airfare reductions for active military personnel on leave. The group wants the airlines to charge them the lowest fare offered for a particular flight, waiving advance-purchase requirements and ticket change and cancellation fees.

The group has allies in Congress, including Reps. Ellen Tauscher, D-Alamo, and Mike Honda, D-San Jose. They helped to insert wording into a House aviation bill that would urge, but not require, the airlines to change their ticketing policies for military personnel.

The bill passed the House, and the amendment's fate lies in how the House and Senate work out the details.

The state Assembly will consider a similar resolution introduced in April.

In the Vietnam era, airlines offered special military reserve and standby fares. Those programs dissolved after deregulation of the airline industry in the 1970s. The mothers took their plea to several airlines. Four replied, citing tough economic conditions and saying they couldn't comply, the group says. There are about 1.4 million U.S. military members on active duty.

American and United airlines declined to discuss the legislation. Instead, they pointed to special "Thank You Fares" introduced shortly after the war in Iraq. Those fares offer discounts to active duty military and, to a lesser extent, their family members, and require shorter advance purchases.

Most of them expire early next year.

"It doesn't guarantee it's going to be the lowest fare always. The fares fluctuate, but they're good deals, and they're less restricted than typical fares," said Mary Frances Fagan, an American Airlines spokeswoman.

Jeff McAndrews, a United spokesman, said it was impossible to compare the fares offered under the airline's policy with the lowest available fares for a given flight.

"Our policy now is pretty much all over the place. We do offer discounts for the military, but it really depends on what type of fare they're looking to buy. There's no overarching way to characterize what the fares are."

That is the problem, say the military mothers. The rules are confusing and the military fares are often sold out, they said.

"They look better on paper. When you try to book them, there are a lot of restrictions. They're not available on the day you want, or two or three days before or after," said Patty Martin of San Ramon, whose son, Matt Martin, served in Iraq.

Martin said the group has received some negative responses to its campaign. Some critics wonder why troops should get a special deal. Their response: These are special cases, with special missions.

"Their schedules are so erratic; they don't have the same advantages as the public has," said Liz Taylor-Weber, whose son, Brian, remains in Iraq. "We're trying to send a loud message to the airlines that we need to effect change."

For details on the campaign, visit www.bluestarmoms.org/airfare.html.